

## Chapter 4: "Return to Malaya"

### Introduction

As we have observed in Maniam's and Baratham's works, the process of negotiating identity is consistently wrought with difficulty and ambivalence, particularly for individuals whose negotiations take place in a home context to which they have recently returned. This is also very much the case for the protagonist in Lee Kok Liang's short story "Return to Malaya", a character about whom we know almost no specific details, but whose sense of confusion and displacement, as well as his attempts to re-locate himself in a Malayan context, are profoundly articulated throughout the course of the story.

Like *The Return*, the title of Lee Kok Liang's story immediately makes clear that the return motif is a significant element in the narrative. However, an important contrast is that this return is designated specifically as a return to Malaya, thus implying an overseas journey as well as a pre-1963 setting.<sup>38</sup> By far, of all the texts discussed in this thesis, "Return to Malaya" focuses least on personal, familial or ethnic identities, but instead explores a more communal identity. This dimension of the narrative is significant because the main character conceives of himself not only in relation to members of his family or immediate community, but also within a larger context that includes a variety of people and places. In addition, his identity as an individual who has been shaped by his overseas experience is constantly in dialogue with this Malayan social realm as he struggles to understand and make sense of himself and his home in the midst of overpowering and disorienting experiences.

---

<sup>38</sup> The nation of Malaya became independent in 1957 and, with the transfer of British sovereignty in North Borneo (Sabah), Sarawak and Singapore, its name was changed to Malaysia in 1963. See D.G.E. Hall's *A History of South-east Asia*, (1981) 923-33. Also, "Return to Malaya" was originally published in *Encounter* in 1954 (Barnes 120), therefore suggesting a time just before independence when the sense of a developing national context is apparent. Nevertheless, most readers think of Lee as a writer from the 1960's and I would argue that reading "Return to Malaya" with the assumption of an already-independent nation in no way significantly alters the meaning or effect of the story.

In "Return to Malaya", as with the texts discussed in previous chapters, the main character's singular and communal identities intersect and influence each other a great deal. However, unlike the protagonists in *The Return*, "Welcome", or "Wedding Night", the relationship between the two aspects of identity--singular and communal--is not primarily one of opposition or exclusion. Though there is a pervasive sense of confusion, misunderstanding and a sort of psychological distance on the part of the protagonist throughout the story, there is also an underlying impetus toward a kind of acknowledgement or acceptance of the home to which he has returned. This dimension of his experience can be illuminated by a recognition of the influence of a Zen Buddhist perspective in the narrative, a perspective commonly found in a number of Lee's works.<sup>39</sup> Rather than the oppositional and exclusionary western discourse of binaries that Ravi, Bala and Krishna incorporate into their understandings of their identities, the unnamed protagonist in "Return to Malaya" sees the difficulties and dilemmas of identity through a more Zen-centred approach. In a study of "Ronggeng-Ronggeng", another of Lee Kok Liang's short stories, Chuah Guat Eng explains:

Processes of thought and understanding are central to Buddhist ethics. Erroneous understanding (of the nature of the object of thought) leads to unskilful [sic] (*akusala*, often inadequately translated as immoral) mental states; and unskilful mental states lead to acts (including speech) that are rooted in selfish motives and end-results. Conversely, a true grasp of the nature of the object of thought leads to skilful [sic] (*kusala*, again often inadequately translated as moral) mental states that lead to acts prompted by a desire for, and resulting in, good for others. (Sangharakshita in Chuah: Part 3, 3-4)

Using this explanation as a general guide in looking at the process of returning home, we can observe how the main character in "Return to Malaya" approaches his difficulties from a vantage point of "erroneous understanding" rather than of "Asian vs. Western", "Tamil vs. English", or even "good vs. bad". In addition, the concept of "singular vs. communal" identities does not manifest itself as divisible or even definable, but instead sees the two as being in on-going communication with each other.

---

<sup>39</sup> See Kee Thuan Chye, "Foremost of the first generation," *New Straits Times* December 30, 1992: Lifestyle/Literary 33 and Shirley Lim, "Gods Who Fail: Ancestral Religions in the New Literatures in English in Malaysia/Singapore," *S.E. Asia Writes Back!* (London: Skoob Books, 1993) 224-37 for further discussion on the role of religion, particularly Buddhism, in Lee's work.

The effect of this approach is that the protagonist more closely embodies Stuart Hall's theory about identity being "in the end conditional, lodged in contingency" and "obey[ing] the logic of more-than-one" (1996: 2-3).

### The logic of more-than-one: strategies for negotiating identity

One significant element in the portrayal of the protagonist in "Return to Malaya" is that many details are left unnamed and unspecified, both about his own character and the people and environment to which he has returned. This strategy gives voice not only to a Zen sensibility,<sup>40</sup> but also to a particular way of viewing collective identities. John Barnes astutely observes that the story "is presented as a series of impressions and anecdotes, randomly assembled, as if taken from the pages of a journal", but whose "randomness is only on the surface. The whole sketch is deftly shaped to render dramatically the narrator's reactions to what he sees and hears on his return home" (120). Among the most obvious absences is the omission of the main character's name, age, family position and profession. There is also a lack of any information about why he left Malaya and why or when he has returned. For the reader, the experience of remaining ignorant of such facts--similar perhaps to the protagonist's own ignorance about the home that "should" be familiar to him--is further emphasised by the question "When did you come back?" which is repeated nearly every time the main character meets someone he knows. However, his reply is never recorded, leaving the reader in the dark about that information and instead, drawing attention to the experiences he is going through, rather than the factual, mundane details of his return home. Without typical "identity markers" such as name, race or age, the main character is still able to adapt to the various locales and demands of his environment. His visits to friends and relatives are also given no explanation other than brief lines such as: "Walking over the old bridge, I came to the main street. I called on two old friends" (136).<sup>41</sup> The name of

---

<sup>40</sup> Zen Buddhism is based primarily on the teaching that one should develop "mindfulness or awareness . . . to live in the present moment, to live in the present action" (Rahula 72).

<sup>41</sup> This and all subsequent references to "Return to Malaya" are from *The Mutes in the Sun and Other Stories* (Kuala Lumpur: Federal Publications, 1981) 126-41 and will be referred to by page number.

the city in which he is staying is also never mentioned, nor are the names of any of the towns he passes through or visits. In fact, besides its presence in the title, "Malaya" itself is only mentioned by name once in the course of the story.

The fact that the protagonist does not name people, places, actions or motivations in the text suggests a kind of return experience and conception of identity that moves away from categories or definitions. Instead, his sense of himself, other people and his physical environment are fluid and ambivalent, highlighting, of course, his own confusion and displacement, but also underscoring a search for a communal identity that is defined by and experienced on terms that are not static, categorising, essentialising or homogenising. This approach to identity can also be seen through the lens of a new and growing sense of a communal identity, but one that is resistant to propagandistic and exclusionary concepts. Shirley Lim argues, "the whole issue of national identity, . . . after all, is the ideology of exclusion" (233), and, though the text does not deal explicitly with national identity, it does challenge the sense of "exclusion" that is typically associated with identity in general. Instead, the protagonist of "Return to Malaya" seems to experience "identity" as in such a way that exclusion is inapplicable. Everything and everyone changes, moves and interacts, and consequently rigidity and strict boundaries are not only undesirable, but also impossible both for individuals and for the nation as a whole.

One of the first of these boundaries of perception that proves to be unstable is that of ownership and the assumption of fixity of material possessions. Again, this follows from the Buddhist concept of the "impermanency" of worldly existence.<sup>42</sup> At the opening of "Return to Malaya", the main character stands in the hall of his house, cursing himself for the theft of his bicycle. This scene introduces the difficulty of "not knowing" (he has forgotten that there are thieves in the city) and also sets a tone of

---

<sup>42</sup> Samyutta Nikaya explains this concept in the following way: "The world is a passing phenomenon. We all belong to the world of time. Every written word, every carved stone, every painted picture, the structure of civilization, every generation of man, vanishes away like the leaves and flowers of forgotten summers. What exists is changeable and what is not changeable does not exist. Thus . . . everything in the universe is subject to the law of impermanency" (qtd. In Sri Dhammananda 87)



solitude, loneliness and confusion. It also serves to mark the context for the protagonist's return home--because his physical arrival is not part of the story, this experience then is rendered insignificant. It is the process of his return once he has physically arrived, in terms of reacquainting himself with Malaya, as well as his movement within this locale, that is important. That is, although the character's individual identity has been altered by his stay abroad, he seeks to accept and understand himself and the people and place to which he has returned without turning to western, rationalistic models.

It is also in this opening scene that the main character is perhaps most conscious of the way his overseas experience has changed him and the difficulties that have resulted from these changes. The reader learns that he is in the presence of family members, presumably in the family house, and that he has "unfortunately" developed the habit of cursing himself during his stay overseas. Nevertheless, it is a habit he does not or cannot give up, and he is also aware that it is a practice that is not only alien but also inconceivable to his relatives.

Last night I had to give up my nocturnal rides. My bicycle had been stolen! I stayed back home. As I paced slowly in the front hall, I cursed myself in a low voice, out of everyone's earshot, of course; for, if my uncles and sisters-in-law were to overhear my soft-spoken oaths, they would at once think I was going mad.

They expected curses to be loud and aimed at something external to the self. Only mad people, they would say, cursed themselves. Unfortunately I had acquired this self-cursing habit from my stay abroad. But I kept it hidden from them; it was no use trying to explain.

They could understand sighs; if a person sighed when alone, they would understand why he should be sighing. But this self-cursing habit of mine would be quite beyond them.

So I continued cursing myself in whispers. My shiny bicycle stolen! What a fool I was; I forgot that there were thieves around! (126)

One of the most important things to note about this opening passage is how this foreign habit functions as an introduction to the entire story. What the reader learns is that the protagonist's mentality and also his own perceptions of himself have actually changed while he has been overseas. These changes, though not necessarily ones he likes, are maintained even in a Malayan environment that does not recognize them and, even if

they were to acknowledge these changes, they would deem them to be signs of madness. Therefore, the protagonist continues to curse himself "in whispers", a detail that conveys a solitude and distance from the larger community to whom it is "no use to try to explain" one's changed self.

This opening scene also indicates one of the primary ways in which the main character deals with the sense of displacement he experiences. Unable to translate his overseas-acquired habits and individual identity into his home context, and similarly unable to recognize, understand and adapt himself to it, he directs his frustrations onto himself by cursing himself. Unlike Baratham's characters, for instance, he does not see others as the cause of his difficulty and discomfort, but instead sees himself as a "fool" for having "forgot[ten] that there were thieves around". Here again, we observe in the protagonist's psychological coping strategy an example of how "it [is] up to the individual to find escape from uncertainty" about his identity and for "socially created problems . . . to be resolved by individual efforts" (Baumann 18). That is, the socially created "problems" of diverse communities characterised, in this case, by individuals whose identities are a mix of "foreign" and "local" influences, are experienced by the protagonist as problems he must address. Nevertheless, this "individual effort" is exerted in a context in which he recognizes that his presence is part of a large and heterogeneous community.

The self-blame and sense of an alienated consciousness that the main character experiences are especially compounded by the ways his own perspective about Malaya and its people has changed. This outsider's perspective is especially apparent in certain commentaries and descriptions of Malaya that imply not only his own "foreign" views, but a foreign reader as well. For example, when describing the conversation he overhears between some children, he explains, "They spoke in a sort of Hokkien Chinese (towns in Malaya are dominated by different Chinese dialects) with a few Malay and English expressions thrown in" (129). Other less obvious, but equally important, "explanations" occur throughout the story, as when the protagonist notes,

"Night falls swiftly in Malaya" (129), and when he makes the comparison, "Fine fluffy snowy drops of drizzle blew against my face; and in the tropics this was like having points of sunlight on one's face on a cold winter's morning, say in London" (131). Even details like the explanation of a "white area" as one that is "safe from the troublesome bandits and trigger-happy boys" (134) and that the sign is written in three languages implies an audience that is not familiar with these well-known aspects of Malayan society, as well as a protagonist who now sees partly through "foreign" eyes. This feeling of being alienated from other people is particularly obvious when he visits the small shrine on the banks of the river and guesses: "Someone must have been praying that afternoon. Perhaps for luck in the 10,000 character lottery. Dreams of huge fortune amassed suddenly! *They* had such trust in miracles and luck!" (141, emphasis added).

His ignorance about and sense of alienation from Malaya, however, are also mirrored by the ignorance and misunderstanding others have towards him.<sup>43</sup> Again, the opening paragraphs indicate that not only has he forgotten the culture and the threats of the city, he is also repeatedly misunderstood, just as he knows his family members would not understand his habit of cursing himself. For example, when he is describing what happened the night that his bicycle was stolen, we see that even his body language is misunderstood by the boys he confronts about the theft: "I walked over to them and touched a clean-shaven head with my fingertips. The boy mistook my gesture. He thought I was going to join in the card game--so he moved over, a sort of crab-like scampering, sliding his buttocks and heels at the same time" (127-8). The protagonist is also misunderstood when he confronts some other boys that he thought had been insulting him when in fact they had been yelling about some missing cards (127).

In these instances we observe that the protagonist is practicing "erroneous understanding lead[ing] to unskilful . . . mental states; and unskilful mental states lead[ing] to acts (including speech) that are rooted in selfish motives and end-results"

---

<sup>43</sup> However, unlike the protagonist, the other people do not recognize their own ignorance about him. This is yet another example of the pressure put on individuals who return home to negotiate their identity.

(Chuah Part 3, 3). He is concerned primarily about himself and is interacting with other people from the vantage point of seeing himself as separate from them, an approach which is reflected in his mental state, actions and speech. Specifically, in the public space of the city streets, he assumes that he is being insulted by the boys when in fact he is not. Then, when he finds his bicycle stolen, his "unskilful mental state" leads him to be selfish in his treatment of others and he goes about interrogating passers-by and eventually going back to the spot where his bicycle had been taken. "I returned to the long-haired boys and this time shouted and threatened. My voice was so full of anger: somehow I didn't care much for my bicycle when I shouted. I just wanted fair play, I felt" (128). The focus here is self-interest that is exhibited in the form of conflict between the protagonist and the boys. However, his "erroneous understanding" begins to become more "skilful" when he recognizes that "in a way, it was a hopeless contest. They had been used to losing so many things, and this was my first loss" (128).

The association between return and loss is one that is frequently repeated throughout the story as the narrator relates his various journeys and experiences from both before and after the theft of his bicycle. Similar instances of confusion and misreadings continue to occur with great frequency and highlight the nature of the return experience as an on-going process of reacquaintance, negotiation and adjustment in which nothing is fixed or permanent.<sup>44</sup> The most obvious example of this is the loss of the bicycle, which results in new kinds of observations and experiences for the main character who no longer has the freedom of easy mobility. "Loss" and "gain" as well as "sameness" and "difference" are also apparent as he travels through the country, observing the countryside from a bus and paying visits to people in small towns. For instance, he describes a familiar coffee shop in the following manner: "The green chicks with huge Chinese characters in faded yellow were lowered over the front of the coffee-shop. The shop was almost empty. White marble table-tops seemed to float in

---

<sup>44</sup> The impermanence of existence, particularly with regard to the material world, is a central tenet of Buddhism. For instance, in his last teaching to his disciples, the Buddha told them, "Do not vainly lament, but realize that nothing is permanent and learn from it the emptiness of human life. Do not cherish the unworthy desire that the changeable might become unchanging" (Bukkyo Dendo Kyokai 13).

the darkened interior like many round-slabs of ice-floes. *Almost the same as before*" (137, emphasis added). In his description of the Malay kampung, he also comments that "Nothing seemed much changed. Only the old bridge was being pulled down, and a new million-dollar bridge, the talk and grumble of the town, was going up very slowly" (135). Among the people he visits, however, he detects changes rather than familiarity: a grand-aunt has grown very thin, a friend is fatter and not as bald as she used to be, an uncle has gone deaf and a woman "with a witty and ironic tongue" (141) whom he seeks out for a visit has mysteriously lost her ability to talk. What these changes indicate is that the people, places and relationships that comprise and define "home" are never static, requiring a constant adaptation to and new understanding of this place called "Malaya".

#### Sensory perception and understanding

The changes and confusion that the main character experiences are not limited to human interactions or physical settings. In a scene that clearly serves as a metaphor for his general experience of home, he is even overwhelmed by his own sensory perception of smell:

But when I got down, the unpleasant fetid exhalation of the wet, warm road pricked my nostrils. How the smells won't let my nose alone! As I walked closer to the eating-stalls, I had less and less of a choice of odours. The smells were so terribly and intricately mixed; the good and bad smells became almost indistinguishable. Sometimes when I thought I was smelling the sweet, disturbing smell of eau-de-cologne, upon lifting my nose higher I found that I was inhaling intolerable quantities of human odour which carried with it, like a wave dragging along minute grains of sand in its rush up the beach, traces of the musty smell of dry dust, of salty sweat, of tingling sulphuric spices, and of foul petrol and oil and powder. (131)

What the above description clearly indicates is that even distinguishing the composition of his physical environment is an impossible task, as is the very basic and supposedly simple determination of whether that which is perceived is something pleasant or fetid. In addition, the process of his attempting to make sense of the confusion is hindered by the overpowering existence of chaotic and abundant stimuli, each, unsuccessfully,

competing for dominance over the others. Overwhelmed, the protagonist reacts by sitting down quickly at a table by himself and turning his attention instead to the visual scene, hoping, perhaps, for some sense of stability and clarity. Not surprisingly, however, the environment surrounding him in the stalls is no less overwhelming than the smells and is characterised by all kinds of people, activities, types of food and human interactions.

In this scene, as well as the rest of the story, the protagonist acts almost exclusively as an observer of what goes on around him. In passage after passage, it is his sensory experiences that guide his movement and understanding, a narrative strategy that also reflects the influence of Zen Buddhism. Chuah Guat Eng's commentary on "Ronggeng-Ronggeng" is similarly applicable to "Return to Malaya":

The authorial viewpoint may seem to be roving randomly over details that have little significance in the subsequent plot, but the sequential organisation of sense-impressions by which the scene is presented in fact follows an order that is basic to the Buddhist understanding of how the mind grasps or understands the phenomenal world through the senses. This process is usually illustrated by the analogy of a man sleeping under a mango tree. The sound of a fruit dropping wakes him up. He seeks the source of the sound, sees the fruit, grasps it, feels it, smells it, decides it is fit to be eaten, eats it, swallows the last morsel, and then goes back to sleep. (Jayasuriya in Chuah: Part 3, 3)

Similar to the man beneath the mango tree, the processes that the main character goes through are almost exclusively guided by and interpreted through his sensory perceptions and do not follow a "rational" narrative line. For instance, when he travels from place to place and person to person, no motivational explanation is offered, and even in scenes in which characters interact directly with him or in which he himself speaks, hardly any conversation is related.

We observe this, for example, in the first visit made to a particular individual, Ai Chye, whom the protagonist meets as he gets off the bus in a small town. However, none of their conversation and none of the protagonist's emotions are related. Instead, the focus is on the physical details of Ai Chye's character--including the information that his name means "short fellow" in Cantonese (135)--and the wares he is selling. As

the protagonist continues to move about the towns and the country, the sense of his relationship to his environment somewhat resembles that of a newcomer to a foreign place, in that he is not stationary, but always moving and looking, without engaging.<sup>45</sup> Even so, he also "sees" from the perspective of someone seeking to understand and accept and realises he has "forgotten" certain things, rather than that he is learning them for the first time. In particular, the process of remembering entails re-establishing former relationships with places and people--which the protagonist apparently does out of conscious choice and free will. This is a distinct and important contrast to the characters that have been discussed in previous chapters who tend to re-enter relationships in their home context with a sense of profound reluctance, fear and/or resentment. This difference indicates that the protagonist in "Return to Malaya" is unique in his willingness to see himself in relation to and as part of a larger community rather than attempting to maintain a separate and distinct identity from his home community.

### Mobility, immobility and knowledge

In seeking to develop an understanding of the home to which he has returned and his place in it, one of the most significant components of the protagonist's experience is the important role played by his own mobility (and immobility) as he moves from location to location. The significance of mobility is introduced as early as the opening passage with the attention that is focused on the object of the bicycle as well as the detail that the protagonist had been taking "nocturnal rides" on a regular basis and is distraught at having to give them up. Consider, for example, that he is not worried about the cost of having to replace the bicycle, ashamed about having to confess what has happened or concerned with any other likely response. What this

---

<sup>45</sup> For more information on characters who relate to and feel detached from the homelands they return to, see Philip Dodd's discussion of Edwin Muir's *Scottish Journey* (1935) and J.B. Priestley's *English Journey* (1934) in *The Views of Travellers - Travel Writing in the 30's* (London: Frank Cass, 1982) 129-31.

implies is his attachment to this instrument and the particular kind of mobility it enables, an attachment that, in Buddhist teachings, is a source of suffering and delusion:

Things do not come and do not go, neither do they appear nor disappear; therefore, one does not get things or lose things. . . . To adhere to a thing because of its form is the source of delusion. If the form is not grasped and adhered to, this false imagination and absurd delusion will not occur.  
(Bukkyo Dendo Kyokai 54-5)

The protagonist's experience does eventually indicate that the "loss" of his bicycle is in fact not a loss, but instead simply another change in the eternally fluctuating nature of existence. It is also an experience that indicates the way in which attachments, even to an object as simple as a bicycle, lead to suffering. The immobility that the protagonist experiences as a result of the theft also enables him new kinds of sensory experiences, such as listening to a conversation between children, which he comments "cheered me up a bit" (129) and a scene in which a servant tries to learn how to ride a bicycle when he thinks to himself: "A few more of such nights and she could sail on her own. What fun! A few more months of saving from her wages--about \$80 per mensem--and she would be able to buy a third-hand bicycle. At least, there was the hope" (130). In these instances and others, it is actually the fact that he no longer has his bicycle that allows him the opportunity to gain a more "skilful" mental state where he is less selfish and more able to empathise with other people.

The motif of mobility is one that recurs throughout the story and is also an important way in which the protagonist develops a sense of his singular and communal identity. For instance, he relates the bus trip he takes "inland" (133) and the wide variety of scenes he encounters as a result of this movement from place to place. There are soldiers playing football in the sun, "rubber plantations which lined the main highway--green leaves with slender trunks arranged evenly like tufts on a hairbrush" (133), "a huge blackboard with thin, neat, white letters painted on it in a schoolmaster's hand" (134) and "a slate-grey buffalo . . . patiently munching grass (134). The most extensive and vivid observations, however, are related to people:

A few Malay boys were diving off from the banks into the yellowish canal. Their bodies shone like polished rosewood. Their eyes were velvety and dark



and their hair hung dripping-wet over their brown foreheads, their features well-proportioned and smooth; now and then they raised their arms with swan-like grace and plunged neatly into the canal.

Some Malay women were walking along wearing many-coloured sarongs and shawls. The file moved along slowly and stately: some had rattan baskets balanced on their heads, some carried naked babies in their arms.

A young woman raised her face and laughed as her baby tried to clutch her breast in the folds of her garments; her expression was dreamy in the sunlight. She adjusted her sarung and offered her breast to her baby as she walked along. (134)

In this description, details such as bodies shining "like polished rosewood", features being "well-proportioned and smooth" and "many-coloured sarongs", as well as phrases like "swan-like grace" and a woman's expression being "dreamy in the sunlight" could be read as conveying an exoticised perspective. Nevertheless, in an unexaggerated manner, the protagonist conjures an image of a people who genuinely appear to be beautiful, happy and content. In addition, the fact that so many other images of people in the story depict suffering and poverty presents the images of beauty within a larger context where human life encompasses the range of everything good and bad, beautiful and ugly.

This sense of human life, specifically in Malaya, is also a dominant aspect of the conclusion of the story. The protagonist visits a woman who has lost her ability to speak. However, this is the one part of the story where we do get direct speech from the main character who asks the woman's son, "Why didn't you get a doctor?" The suffering that characterises human life is immediately apparent in the son's reply: "Ai-ya! Doctors are very expensive, you know" and the woman moves her lips with great difficulty: "Why can't I talk? Tell me. Why . . . can't I talk now?" (141) However, the main character, in a moment of *kusala* ("skilful") thought, acts selflessly and comforts the woman with his own speech:

"Don't worry, you'll soon get well," I said. I walked out swiftly. The red piece of paper was flapping gently in the breeze.

As I rode across the waters, I heard the voices of the children, screaming and laughing on the banks. They must have been born with lusty lungs (141).

In this conclusion, a final impression is created in which the protagonist's thoughtful concern for the sick woman is significant and also in which attention is focused on movement and sensory detail. The final paragraph, however, also highlights an overall sense of the cyclical, fluid nature of existence as "an unending flux of becoming" where "all is changeable, continuous transformation, ceaseless mutation, and a moving stream" (Sri Dhammandanda 86).

### Conclusion

Similar to the characters in the other texts that have been discussed, the protagonist in "Return to Malaya" faces a great deal of confusion, frustration, loneliness and conflict in the process of returning home. These feelings are largely the result of the way in which he is change--as are other characters--by his overseas experience and also by the new perspectives he brings to bear on his home and himself. However, in the case of "Return to Malaya", the protagonist's struggle can be seen as being especially influenced by Buddhist philosophy. Rather than focusing on issues of identity in the context of a family and/or ethnic community, he seeks to understand himself in a broader framework without resorting to the common discourse of exclusion. Instead, his impetus is toward accepting and accommodating the changes and difficulties he encounters in his home context and seeking to understand himself through an approach that is rooted in Buddhist rather than western, rationalistic and/or orientalist thought. As a result, the impression created is one in which individual identity is not inherently in conflict with communal identity, nor in which a person is compelled or forced to relinquish one identity in order to gain another. Rather, in an intersection of thought between Buddhist philosophy and contemporary cultural theory, the nature of identity--like the nature of human existence--is that it is always conditional and in flux.